

**The Saracens  
of  
Biddulph Moor  
and  
The Crusaders' Coffins**

**Various Theories**

**by Eric Cox**

## **The Saracens of Biddulph Moor and the Crusaders' Coffins**

There was a great deal of local interest for January's meeting of Biddulph History Club when Eli Lewis-Lycett gave a talk on 'The Local Crusader, the Biddulph Moor Saracens'. This attracted one of the largest audiences for a while, with 57 members and 53 non-members attending, as well as over 80 hits on the local Facebook pages.

History is all about different interpretations and views differ. As a result, I have decided to put together some of the different theories and views which have appeared over the years.

In doing this, we need to look at what we know is historical fact. This will include the various manors of Biddulph in the Norman period, the names of the main families around at that time, and their details. We need to look at what we know about the Crusades and how they were organised, which includes the known facts about the role of Knights Templars.

This will set the background to the legends of the 'Black men of Biddle Moor'.

We will then go on to look at the various written accounts as to their origin and what some 'experts' have to say about the subject.

### **The Legends**

This study is concerned with the following legends:

- 1 People of Biddulph Moor are descendants of the Saracens who were brought back from the Crusades.
- 2 The Baileys of Biddulph Moor are the descendants of these people.
- 3 The Saracens were stonemasons and are connected with the building of St Chads Church in Stafford.
- 4 The coffin lids in Biddulph Church (St Lawrence's) are the Crusaders' coffins and are connected with The Knights Templar.

**"Our legends rarely turn out to be pure fantasy, but many have been embellished across the years to the point of appearing *fantastical*" (Eli Lewis-Lycett: *Myhistoric Origins*: (Page 9).**

## **The Crusades**

The Crusades were military expeditions beginning in 1095 AD, organised by Western European Christians to try to retake the Holy Land from the Muslims. All in all, there were nine Crusades over a period of nearly 200 years ending in 1291 with the Fall of Acre.

The Pope of the day would call on the western kings of Christendom to embark on a Crusade to free the Holy Land, the king would call on the barons, lords of the manor to organise an army to go out to fight. Often, there would be specific meeting places where they all assembled, such as The Olde Trip to Jerusalem pub in Nottingham (which is reputed to be the oldest public house in England).

Some of the Lords of the Manor would find it exciting and with some of their retainers, and with their bold red crosses emblazoned on their tunics, they made their way across Europe to free the Holy Land. So, it is feasible that one or more of the local Lords of the Manor took part in this.

In many ways, the Crusades were an extension of European warfare into the Middle East. They took with them their heavy armour and swords, which were totally unsuitable in hot countries and even built Crusaders Castles.

The Knights Templar, who are often connected to the Biddulph Crusaders' tombs lids, were an elite fighting force of its day; highly trained, well-equipped and highly motivated whose task was to defend Jerusalem from the Muslim invaders. When some of them returned to England, there is evidence of their presence nearby in Keele.

It was common practice for a lord to bring back slaves from his conquest and also there is evidence to suggest that some were brought over as stonemasons to help build and design churches. This gives a touch of authenticity to some of the Saracens of Biddulph Moor legends.

## **Biddulph during the time of the Crusades**

When William I became King of England in 1066, he rewarded his followers with vast estates in England, replacing many of the Saxon lords with his Norman knights. Much of the north of England had been laid to waste, in William's 'Harrying of the North', as he suppressed various Saxon rebellions.

William bequeathed Biddulph to Richardus Forestorian (Richard Forester), who has a direct ancestry to the Biddulph family.

Biddulph was eventually divided into four estates:

Manor of Over Bydulfe (Overton)

Manor of Nether Bydulfe (Gillow Heath)

Manor of Middle Bydulfe

Manor of Knypersley.

There are detailed family trees of the associated families stretching back to 1066 and Richard Forester and these can be found in 'The Topography and Antiquities of the Parish of Biddulph' (1837) by Rev. William Hadfield. (Biddulph and District Genealogy and Historical Society published this – well worth a read).

Two of the people often linked with the Saracens of Biddulph Moor are mentioned here, **'Ormus le Guidon**, also known as de Deroveston, Grantee of Biddulph and Lord of various other manors in Staffordshire, married the daughter of the Sheriff of Staffordshire (see later reference to St Chad's Church in Stafford) and **Thomas de BIdulfe**, son and heir, Lord of Middle Bydulfe. He attended Prince Edward and afterwards King Edward I to the Crusades in AD 1263/64 and is said to have brought back on his return a number of Saracen prisoners of war, the reputed ancestors of a singular race of men now existing in Biddulph' (Page 16)

Is this the first written account of the legend of the Saracens of Biddulph Moor?

## Who bought the Saracens back from the Crusades?

Some of the different accounts:

**John Sleigh** in his '**History of The Ancient Parish of Leek**' (1862) writes '*One of the lords of Biddulph, a knight-crusader, is reputed to have brought over in his train from the Holy Land, a Paynim, who he made bailiff of his estate and from whom marriage with an English woman the present race of 'Biddle-moor men' are traditionally said to have sprung. Probably this infusion of Saracenic blood may account for their Nordic and somewhat bellicose propensities.*'

### **Ormus le Guidon:**

*'It is thought that Orm brought back seven Saracen Stonemasons and that their descendants became the Bailey family, whose children had the 'most lovely shades of red hair'* (Ludchurchmybiog.wordpress).

An extract from St Chad's Church information on its history: '*Beresford, in 1909, suggested that Orm of Biddulph founded St Chad's Church in Stafford and he may have invented the idea that Biddulph folk were stone masons. His main evidence was that the font in St Mary's church.*'

There is evidence of Orm marrying the Sherriff of Stafford's daughter, so there is the Biddulph link.

Apparently, this font he considered had an inscription in Latin that read: '*Thou bearest from Jerusalem (the waters of life)*', which Beresford concluded was a reference to the Crusades. St Chad's Church, it was said, had Eastern influences and that the church was built by these Saracen stonemasons which showed signs of an Eastern influence. Hence Orm must have gone over to the Holy Land on one of the Crusades and brought back stone masons.

DA Johnson, editor of the Victoria County History, claimed that this story is pure fantasy. He claims '*the idea of eastern carvers was started when the vicar of Biddulph, Jonathon Wilson, claimed in 1791 that his church showed eastern influences in its apparently obscene carvings.*'

However, he goes on to say that '*Wilson did not claim any eastern influence, simply that though it was odd having a 'priapic' figure as a waterspout on a Christian church, it was common in the east to have obscene sexual figures representing divinity. It is hard to see any connection between this and the*

*story of the Black Men of Biddle!*' They concluded there is no real evidence for this.

### **Thomas de Bidulfe:**

Rev Hadfield in 'Topography and Antiquities of the Parish of Biddulph' (1837) states:

*'Thomas de Budulfe, son and heir, Lord of Middle Biddulph. He attended Prince Edward and afterwards King Edward I to the Crusades AD 1263/4 and is said to have brought back on his return a number of Saracen prisoners of war, the reputed ancestors of a singular race of men now existing in Biddulph.'*

Eli Lewis-Lycett, who gave an interesting talk to Biddulph Genealogical and Historical Society in January 2024 came up with another theory. He based this theory on the fact that if a number of Saracens were brought back from the Holy Land to work as stonemasons, someone had to be very rich to do so, perhaps buying them from the slave markets in Marseilles and transporting them over to England. The only person, he claimed, who was capable of doing this was Ranulf De Blondeville, the Sixth Earl of Chester who later became Sheriff of Cheshire and Staffordshire. He went over on the Fifth Crusade and when returned he became a major benefactor in helping to found Dieulacres Abby in Leek (hence his connection to this area). This Abby eventually had extensive lands in Cheshire and Staffordshire and it was suggested that he could have held land in Biddulph Moor (although there doesn't seem to be evidence of this). He suggested that this Cistercian monastery became very rich and could have been responsible for the change in the use of land in Biddulph Moor from forest to sheep farming.

## The Crusaders' Tombstones: St. Lawrence's Church.

According to Joseph Kennedy's 'Biddulph by the Diggings', ***'During the rebuilding (of Biddulph Church) of 1833-34, the ancient cross in the churchyard was taken down and re-sited on the south side of the church. A group of eight stone coffin lids was also re-sited and these have incised carvings which has led to their being interpreted in a Crusader context. It is quite possible however, that the symbolism on the lids is local and refers to the occupations of the persons concerned'*** (Page 31)

St. Lawrence's Church has claimed to have a link with the crusades and the Knights Templar, because of a series of stone coffin lids with Norman cross and sword designs carved on them, now along the sides of the church. Though the Templars held an estate at Keele, these coffin lids are not particularly associated with the Templars. They are common Norman style, and may not even be connected with knights or crusades at all



## Are the people on Biddulph Moor 'Different'?

If we examine what people have said in the past:

**The Reverend Hatfield** writes in 'The Topography and Antiquities of the Parish of Biddulph' (1837)

*In any description of the Parish of Biddulph it would be an omission to forget to mention of the very singular people who inhabit the Moorish district on the Eastern side. The constant tradition has existed that they originally sprung from a number of Saracen prisoners of war, or servants, who attended one of the Manorial Lords of the Manor (Thomas de Bidulfe who accompanied Prince Edward to the Crusades in 1264) on his return from the Holy Land. These people certainly bear both in Person and Character strong traces of such a descent. There swarthy complexions, black hair, and dark, but frequently brilliant eyes, sometimes accompanied in the females with what we should call gypsy beauty, are marks of an eastern race and low cunning, and dishonourable principles accompanied with great aversion to laborious employment and there fondness for a wondering and indolent life, exhibit only too much of the Eastern Character. For years they have continued almost exclusively to intermarry each other and banded together as a clan and custom is even now seldom departed from and most probably it will require many years to overcome the feelings and prejudices which are entertained against them and to produce an amalgamation of them amongst the inhabitants of the country, around A.D. 1837." (Page 4)*

The reputation of people up at Biddulph Moor must have been well-known throughout North Staffordshire and South Cheshire. **This is an extract from the vicar of St. Thomas' Church in Kidsgrove, Rev Fredrick Wade, in 1837, who wrote about people in Kidsgrove:**

*"Some five or six years ago the inhabitants of this place were said to be in a state little removed from barbarism, notoriously ignorant, vicious and depraved, and as much a terror to the surrounding country as the now equally notorious 'Biddle Moor."*

Another account by **S Burne in 1909**, in connection with North Staffs Field Club, wrote, after she had visited Biddulph Moor, that '**they had oval faces, brown ruddy complexions and hair in shades of auburn hair.**'

There is another theory to account for the people of Biddulph Moor being 'different'. Apparently, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Biddulph Moor was occupied by some Gypsies (the word Gypsy comes from Egyptian), known as the Locke family. These appeared to be a wild, lawless family that gave rise to the notorious notion that the people of Biddulph Moor were 'different' from other people living in North Staffordshire.

Clearly, in an isolated community like Biddulph Moor, everyone was related to everyone, with the Bailey name being predominant, thus linking them back to Saracen ancestry.

It asserted that there were different characteristics and there were a 'blue' clan, 'pinkie' and 'flatnoses'.

A number of people whose families originated from Biddulph Moor have had DNA testing and not surprisingly, after so many generations, they proved inconclusive. If you think about it, you have half the genes of your parents, a quarter of your grandparents, and an eighth of your great grandparents and this is only the three generations, so the chance of DNA testing dating back to medieval times is remote.

However, it still doesn't stop someone from Biddulph Moor, writing on Facebook '**I'm proud of my Saracen heritage.**'

History is all about interpretation. Although there is very little written evidence that someone brought some Saracen slaves back from the Holy Land, as stonemasons or used as Bailiffs for the estates (hence the name Bailey), and settled in the isolated place of Biddulph Moor, intermarrying with locals, you wouldn't expect much to be written down. However, there appears to be a great oral tradition, passed down from generation to generation until it becomes local folklore. And to quote Eli Lewis-Lycett again "**Our legends rarely turn out to be pure fantasy**".